Throughout 2020, our small team at the international office continued to drive forward the five strategic objectives outlined in our 2017-2020 Strategic Outlook: 1. Increase access to healthcare 2. Guarantee quality of services 3. Strengthen data management, monitoring, evaluation and research 4. Optimise our funding base 5. Enhance governance, leadership and team engagement.

These objectives will continue to be applied and delivered across the organisation throughout 2021 and the coming years. Our efforts and plans for the year were severely impacted by the outbreak of Covid-19, as has been the case across the globe and for many organisations. Nonetheless, our frontline staff played an integral role in ensuring we were able to meet our number one priority, which was ensuring a continuity of care for the key populations and vulnerable communities we serve. Thanks to additional support from our partners the Trafigura and Puma Energy Foundations, Grand Challenges Canada and Aidsfonds, we were able to respond appropriately and swiftly adapt our operations to curtail any foreseen disruption to healthcare access.

To this end, we ramped up our infection prevention and control (IPC) measures, in alignment with World Health Organisation guidelines. This included the delivery of regular training sessions for our clinic staff, equipping them with personal protective equipment (PPE), as well as delivering behavioural change communication and awareness raising campaigns, to ensure both our staff and clients alerted to the risks of infection. The high infection prevention standards we implemented enabled each of our sites to remain operational throughout the pandemic. During this period, we screened a total of 128,900 clients and staff for coronavirus, of which 560 (543 clients, 17 staff) were identified as meeting the Covid-19 case definition, with an overall of 14 positive cases (11 clients, 3 staff).
Considering that many of our beneficiaries are actively mobile, including truck drivers, who during the Covid-19 crisis needed to continue with the transportation of essential goods across borders, North Star has a critical role to play in reducing the risk of the virus spreading throughout the continent. Our role in mitigating the movement of the virus between borders featured in a news report in the French national newspaper *Le Monde*.

This was followed by features in two Dutch national newspapers the *FD* and *Trouw*, which both reported on our outreach interventions in Ngodwana South Africa, through which we’ve actively taken services into the community during periods of lockdown and travel restrictions. The Associated Press subsequently picked up this story and produced a video report and news article, that was later to be published through a variety of news outlets including *abcnews*, *The Washington Post*, *New York Post* and *The Indian Express*.

The repercussions of Covid-19 have also had a direct impact on our international office staff, who have all been working from home since the middle of March, in response to the Dutch government’s guidelines. This subsequently prompted the decision to have the Utrecht office space contract cancelled with a view to making a significant cost saving.

During the past few years, the organisation has also shifted away from the more traditional head office structure, by moving towards the implementation of our matrix management model. This has in turn accelerated institutional growth, enhanced our governance, as well as strengthened leadership and team engagement across the organisation. Our matrix management structure also facilitates smart scaling, as well as quality improvement, monitoring, evaluation and research activities cross-regionally, as well as on a country and clinic level. As a result, this shift in direction has resulted in senior management and strategic decision-making evenly distributed, with collaboration strengthened across the organisation.

In addition, there has been an increasing importance for senior management and our offices to be located close to the heart of our operations out in the field, which enables us to maintain a stronger understanding of local complexities at a strategic level. Furthermore, it has become increasingly evident that donors are more interested in investing directly and locally at a project and programme level.

Having identified and selected an electronic medical records (EMR) system suitable for our cross-border requirements, we have been working behind the scenes on a needs and gap analysis. This was subsequently followed with the development phase, which began with the system being rolled out at our Cato Ridge clinic in South Africa, as part of the introduction of the revenue generation pilot project. Since its implementation, we have also been busy with the procurement of hardware, system testing, the development of additional features and master data, training staff, as well as identifying potential improvements, which have been submitted to the developer. We are now currently undertaking preparations for the EMR to be rolled out at two additional clinics in Kenya and Uganda in 2021, with other clinics following afterwards.

As referenced above, the doors were reopened to our Cato Ridge clinic in South Africa at the beginning of March, to launch our first revenue generation pilot project. The clinic now offers affordable healthcare, through a fee for service model, which is designed to provide North Star with a supplementary income stream.

This will in turn support longer-term sustainability with a view to reducing reliability on donor subsidies. The introduction of Covid-19 lockdown measures shortly after the clinic reopened, has meant client visits and income have to date been relatively slow, however as restrictions begin to be lifted, the numbers have steadily increased.

In spite of 2020 being a challenging year, we are confident we’ll be strongly positioned to further advance and make significant headway into our five strategic objectives throughout 2021. We also firmly believe that the transition of responsibilities from the international office to the Eastern and Southern African regions will place North Star in a stronger position in the longer term. With this in mind, we would like to take the opportunity to express our heartfelt thanks to our partners Trafigura Foundation, Puma Energy Foundation, Pfizer Foundation, Grand Challenges Canada, Johnson & Johnson Corporate Citizenship Trust and Stichting Dioraphte, for their ongoing support throughout the year.